

January 4, 2001

Sam Raker, Co-Chair
Stan Schiff, Co-Chair
Transportation Policy Report Task Force
Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission
8787 Georgia Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Dear Messrs. Raker and Schiff:

There is a pressing need to provide traffic congestion relief between Georgia Avenue and the Shady Grove area. Muncaster Mill Road, the only arterial connecting these two areas, is operating at capacity, yet without any further relief traffic is projected to grow another 50% during the next twenty years. Therefore, I am pleased that the Secretary of the Maryland Department of Transportation has come to the same conclusion I have and has announced his intention for the State Highway Administration to initiate a project planning study for this western corridor. (See the highlighted paragraph in his letter to the County Executive, attached.) I request that the Transportation Policy Report Task Force evaluate the options identified in this letter among the scenarios it is currently developing.

I come to this conclusion from two perspectives. At the Maryland Department of Transportation's Tour Meeting on the Draft FY 2001-2006 Consolidated Transportation Program, many Delegates and Senators expressed concern that the State was not proceeding with project planning for the so-called Western Parkway, the segment of the Intercounty Connector master plan alignment between I-370 and Georgia Avenue/Norbeck Road. At that meeting State Highway Administrator Parker Williams noted that, if the County and State could agree on a scope of work, SHA would be willing to study potential improvements in a corridor extending from the vicinity of Georgia Avenue west to the Shady Grove area.

The Council has been wrestling with this issue for over a year. Last fall we requested the County Planning Board to study the feasibility of two options in this western corridor: widening Muncaster Mill Road to four lanes from Shady Grove Road to Norbeck Road; and extending Midcounty Highway as four lanes from Shady Grove Road to Muncaster Mill Road and widening Muncaster Mill Road from that point southeast to Norbeck Road. That study is scheduled to be completed this winter and will be ready to be presented to the Council in early March.

My second perspective stems from SHA's recently announced \$10 million project to provide safety improvements to Muncaster Mill Road between Woodfield Road and Norbeck Road. While these funds are welcomed, the project poses a timing issue for the County. Ideally, if the Council were to decide that all or part of Muncaster Mill Road should be four lanes as a result of the Planning Board's study, the road

would be widened as part of this project. However, the Council would make its formal decision on this issue as part of its adoption of the Upper Creek Master Plan, and that is not scheduled until February 2002, already halfway through SHA's design schedule for the safety project. Furthermore, if the County were to ask the SHA to undertake such a widening, SHA would likely want to follow the NEPA planning process so the project would be eligible for Federal funding. This would defer action for a few more years.

As a result, without a project planning study, there is the possibility that there will be major disruption on Muncaster Mill Road twice within just a few years, first during the construction of the safety improvement in FYs 2004-06, and then—should the Council approve of a widening in the master plan—when the road is widened literally a couple of years later. Instead, my objective is to have the safety and capacity improvements occur simultaneously, should the Council ultimately decide in the master plan that all or part of Muncaster Mill Road be widened to four lanes.

Therefore, in order to provide a significant congestion relief in this western corridor between Georgia Avenue and Shady Grove, and to lessen the potential disruption to commuters and residents in this area, I urge that SHA and the TPR Task Force examine at least the following alternatives as part of their respective studies:

- ***Widening Muncaster Mill Road to four through lanes.*** As suboptions to this option SHA should examine the benefits, costs, and impacts of both divided and undivided cross-sections (i.e., with and without medians). Also, when examining the impact of this and all the other alternatives and suboptions, SHA should assume a hiker-biker trail in each cross-section.
- ***Extending a four-lane Midcounty Highway to Muncaster Mill Road and four-laning the latter south to Norbeck Road.*** As with the above option, SHA should evaluate the widened portion of Muncaster Mill Road both with divided and undivided cross-sections. This alternative poses the issue of access points. Assuming that Midcounty Highway would intersect with Redland Road is consistent with current plans. Assuming a grade separation at Olde Mill Run is appropriate, as it is a secondary residential street in the middle of the Winters Run neighborhood.
- ***Extend Midcounty Highway as four lanes to Georgia Avenue and as two or four lanes east to Norbeck Road.*** This option should be studied, because each of the prior options has the potential of creating a large congestion point at the intersection of Norbeck and Muncaster Mill Roads. I also recommend SHA examine two suboptions, however:

One suboption is to terminate Midcounty Highway at Georgia Avenue. Some members of the community believe that connecting Midcounty Highway to Norbeck Road will induce substantial cross-county travel demand on eastern Norbeck and Spencerville Roads. Evaluating this suboption will allow us determine if this would be so.

The other suboption would have a grade separation (i.e., no connection) at Midcounty Highway and Emory Lane. The pros and cons of an access point can only be fully gauged by understanding how traffic flow in the south Olney area would be influenced by this decision.

- ***Construct a Western Parkway as four lanes from I-370 to Georgia Avenue and as two or four lanes east to Norbeck Road.*** This alternative would have the characteristics that I understand have

been espoused by the Governor: four lanes; a narrow median; limiting commercial traffic to single-unit trucks; tolls to be used both to generate revenue and manage demand; increasing bus transit service and allowing buses and carpools free use of the road; and a parallel hiker-biker trail. It should also be evaluated with the suboption to terminate the road at Georgia Avenue.

When the State and Federal environmental resources agencies reviewed the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the Intercounty Connector, they raised serious concerns about the western portion of the Master Plan Alignment, although no fatal flaws were identified. Perhaps the features the Governor has proposed will mitigate most of these concerns, but I suspect that this particular option has such significant environmental impacts that, ultimately, it may not be an acceptable alternative. Nevertheless, exploration of transportation options in the western corridor would not be complete without examining the Western Parkway, and so I will keep an open mind about it until the project planning study is completed.

In addition, I want to make these further points:

- All alternatives should include all reasonably available mitigation measures to minimize disruption to environmentally sensitive areas and to the surrounding communities, including noise barriers, use of construction techniques to preserve wetlands and minimize disturbance to the natural environment, and generous landscaping to provide visual screening.
- This study should not affect the Norbeck Road/Norbeck Road Extended/Spencerville Road project planning study. The latter study should be restricted to options that widen existing Norbeck and Spencerville Roads as well as Norbeck Road Extended, which is currently under construction as a two-lane road. I believe the widening should be limited to no more than four through lanes. I find the options in this area that were part of the ICC DEIS's Northern Alignment or Midcounty Highway/MD 198 Alignment to be unreasonable and unacceptable, and I oppose revisiting them.
- The TPR Task Force should evaluate a possible upgraded connection between the I-270 Corridor and MD 32 in Howard County. Such a connection could supplement the east-west connections already provided by Randolph Road and, ultimately, by MD 28 and MD 198. If Howard County officials concur, MDOT should initiate a feasibility study to examine options in this corridor as well.

I am gratified that SHA will be initiating this western corridor project planning study and, therefore, I ask that the Task Force incorporate these options into the scenarios it is currently developing. Thank you for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Michael L. Subin
Councilmember

MLS:go

Copies: The Honorable Parris N. Glendening, Governor of Maryland
The Honorable Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Lieutenant Governor of Maryland
The Honorable Casper R. Taylor, Jr., Speaker, Maryland House of Delegates
The Honorable Thomas V. Mike Miller, Jr., President, Maryland Senate
The Honorable Kumar Barve, Chair, Montgomery County House Delegation
The Honorable Ida Ruben, Chair, Montgomery County Senate Delegation
The Honorable Douglas M. Duncan, County Executive
Mr. John Porcari, Secretary, Maryland Department of Transportation
Mr. Parker Williams, State Highway Administrator
Mr. William Hussmann, Chair, Montgomery County Planning Board